

Statement of
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United States Department of Transportation
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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
United States House of Representatives
Hearing on Rebuilding Highway and Transit Infrastructure on the Gulf Coast
Following Hurricane Katrina
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) actions to rebuild the highway infrastructure on the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina. Our hearts go out to all those affected by the recent hurricanes, and we look forward to continuing our efforts to help the citizens of the Gulf Coast rebuild their transportation infrastructure and their lives. These storms have presented enormous challenges to all those involved, but the events also have helped to bring out the best in the public servants at our Agency, and I am grateful for their continued service.

I visited the affected areas with Louisiana's Secretary of Transportation and Development, Johnny Bradberry, and Mississippi Department of Transportation's Executive Director, Butch Brown, and the Highway Commission Chairman, Wayne Brown, and had an opportunity to see the devastation first-hand. While TV coverage, aerial surveys, and photos of bridge and roadway damage along I-10, US 90, and other area roads tell the story of Katrina's force, they could not convey the full impact of the devastation that I witnessed.

Critical sections of Federal-aid highways in New Orleans were submerged for an extended period of time. An I-10 bridge structure at Pascagoula was damaged, forcing single lane traffic across the remaining structure. Highway bridges along both I-10 and US 90 had huge deck slabs, weighing many tons, shifted and lifted off their support piers and dumped into the water. Massive casino barges along the Mississippi coast were yanked from their moorings and deposited onto US 90 at locations, in some cases, that were more than a mile away from their original sites. US 90, an important artery for Gulf Coast residents, was impassible in numerous locations due to the debris and structural damage. This highway infrastructure damage represents only a small fraction of the total devastation inflicted on the communities in Mississippi and Louisiana.

The United States Department of Transportation and FHWA remain firmly committed to helping the ravaged areas recover as quickly as possible. There is much work to be done in both the short-term and long-term. FHWA has been working closely

with our State and Federal partners before, during, and after the storm. Today, I would like to share with you some of the details related to our response.

Pre-Hurricane Activities

FHWA was well positioned to rapidly respond to the effects of Hurricane Katrina. We have permanent Division Offices in each State, and have developed both first-hand knowledge of the States and strong professional and personal relationships with State and local highway officials. The mutual trust and confidence that preexisted Hurricane Katrina provided an excellent foundation for an effective plan and team effort to execute a timely highway response to the hurricane disaster. Our Division Offices provided advice to State and local jurisdictions concerning Emergency Relief program eligibility and engineering and contracting issues, and shared lessons learned from prior emergency situations.

Response Immediately after Hurricanes

As soon as we could re-enter the affected areas, FHWA deployed personnel, including employees from outside the affected States, to work alongside State highway and local officials to help assess the damage and to help facilitate response and recovery efforts. In response to Hurricane Katrina, FHWA deployed 104 employees from our Headquarters and from 24 field offices to Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi to support relief activities.

I must express my admiration for the State and local road crews, many of whom suffered great personal losses along with their community neighbors. Mississippi and Louisiana responded exceptionally well in getting debris removal underway. Road crews began clearing debris including downed trees and power lines from highways and bridges as soon as it was safe to do so after the storm. Consequently, with the exception of areas that were flooded, the States opened their essential Federal-aid highways for responders in less than a day, where re-entry was warranted.

FHWA employees worked shoulder to shoulder with our State and local counterparts to rapidly assess the situation and to shape strategies that would provide the most efficient response. We provided ready access to past lessons learned and helped Mississippi and Louisiana to work with Florida experts in addressing the bridge damage along I-10 and US 90, since Florida had experienced similar challenges following Hurricane Ivan last year. FHWA-provided information was used to support the flow of relief goods and services into the Gulf Coast region. This information was shared throughout all levels of government and with industry organizations, such as the American Trucking Associations. For example, FHWA posted State proclamations and weight permit and waiver information on our web site.

Just after the hurricanes, our Division Offices in the impacted areas conducted refresher training on our Emergency Relief program for joint FHWA and State damage assessment teams. For example, the Louisiana Division Office met with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development leadership and the team members and explained the Emergency Relief Program. The same type of training was held for the local jurisdictions of Jefferson and Orleans parishes. This training increased the efficiency of the teams to make Emergency Relief program eligibility decisions.

The Emergency Relief program provides reimbursement to States for expenses related to highway infrastructure damage associated with natural disasters and other emergency situations, such as Hurricane Katrina. Examples of the type of work eligible for Emergency Relief program reimbursement include repairing pavements, shoulders, slopes, embankments, guard rails, signs, traffic control devices, and bridges, and removing debris from the highway rights-of-way. Reimbursement under the Emergency Relief program is for the repair and restoration of highway facilities to pre-disaster conditions. However, Emergency Relief program reimbursement is not for new construction to increase capacity, correct non-disaster related deficiencies, or otherwise improve highway facilities.

FHWA has made down payments to the States of Louisiana and Mississippi for emergency relief. We provided Louisiana with \$5 million of Aquick release≅ Emergency Relief funds for the I-10 Twin Span Bridge, which connects New Orleans and Slidell, with the understanding that more funds to support the repair of the bridge and damage to other Federal-aid highways and bridges would be forthcoming. We also provided Mississippi with \$5 million in Aquick release≅ Emergency Relief to reimburse the State for repairs to US 90, I-10, and other Federally funded roads and bridges.

In addition to the immediate infusion of funds, FHWA has expedited environmental reviews to ensure that we can get work underway as quickly as possible, while still being good stewards of the environment. In Headquarters, we coordinated with the Council on Environmental Quality and other Federal agencies to use existing expedited procedures to streamline the environmental analysis process for the States. For example, we worked with affected Federal and State agencies to approve the preparation of an expedited Environmental Assessment, with limited deviations from FHWA=s standard procedures, for the US 90 bridge replacement and associated approach roadwork in the area of Biloxi Bay and Ocean Springs. Furthermore, our employees in the field have used rapid-response coordination techniques to get critical environmental information immediately by phone or electronic mail.

Recovery

FHWA also has been working actively to support long-term recovery efforts across the region. Every day we are making more progress in repairing the transportation

systems destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Our primary goal is to help restore the stability and quality of life to the people of the Gulf Coast as quickly as possible. Over the past few weeks we have made remarkable strides, and we will continue to build on that success to ensure that the region's transportation network serves as an engine of its economic recovery.

We worked with the States to provide appropriate expedited procedures to get contractors underway with repairs. Incentives have been employed effectively to ensure the timeliest possible restoration of lost essential service. For example, Mississippi awarded a \$5.2 million contract to repair one of the highest priority roads in the region B the I-10 bridge at Pascagoula B and included not only an incentive if work is completed in less than 31 days, but also a corresponding penalty for finishing late. I am pleased to report this bridge reopened on October 1 B almost ten days ahead of the contract completion date. Louisiana is using a similar technique to restore initial service across the I-10 Bridge at Slidell. The first phase of the I-10 repair was completed on October 14 – 16 days ahead of schedule. The sight of traffic congestion in both directions returning to the bridge within minutes of being reopened was convincing testimony to the vital nature of the service that had been restored. We strongly support these A incentivized ≡ contracts, and we are out in the field working closely with the States to exercise all appropriate options and tools available during this rebuilding effort.

The long-term restoration of roadways is considered permanent repair work under the Emergency Relief program. Generally, permanent repair and reconstruction work, not accomplished as emergency repairs, must be done by a competitive bid contract method unless the State demonstrates some other method is cost-effective. This work can be expedited using innovative contracting procedures available under the Federal-aid Program, such as the design-build contracting method.

In addition to the Aquick release ≡ Emergency Relief funds, all affected States may use up to \$100 million per State per event for Federal-aid highway roads and bridges damaged as a result of the hurricanes. When an event of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina occurs, the repair cost can far exceed available Emergency Relief funding. However, repairs can still get underway with other Federal-aid or State funds.

We will continue to work with State and local governments to identify long-term highway recovery needs. We are engaged in interagency coordination with the US Army Corps of Engineers to ensure that infrastructure recovery is coordinated and synchronized. We are leading coordination among other agencies to ensure that up-to-date engineering design criteria are provided and environmental requirements are accomplished in ways that will not impede the rapid recovery of lost or damaged infrastructure.

A number of longer-term projects have been identified in the impacted States.

The following is a brief description of such projects.

Louisiana: Hurricane Katrina severely damaged the I-10 Twin Spans over Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. A \$31 million incentivized emergency repair contract was let to provide interim two-way, single-span access to New Orleans by October 30 and access across both spans by January 18, 2006. The first span of I-10 re-opened on October 14 – 16 days ahead of schedule. Louisiana is considering a replacement bridge that would be constructed to current design standards and criteria, and we will work with them on those efforts. In addition to the bridge, many sections of I-10 were flooded due to the levee breaks. The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and routes LA 1 and LA 23 also sustained some damage.

Mississippi: Emergency repair projects are currently underway to restore sections of US 90 from Pass Christian to Biloxi-Ocean Springs. A series of emergency repair projects are under contract (via force account) to restore US 90 to two lanes from Pass Christian to Biloxi-Ocean Springs by December 9th. Storm surge heavily damaged approximately 30 miles of US 90 roadway between Bay St. Louis and Biloxi. Additionally, two US 90 bridges B the Bay St. Louis bridge and Biloxi-Ocean Springs bridge B collapsed during Hurricane Katrina. Design-build contracts will be utilized to replace these bridges. Requests for proposals will be issued for both bridges before the end of October.

Alabama: Mobile and Baldwin Counties suffered the majority of the damage from Hurricane Katrina in Alabama. The Cochrane-Africatown Bridge over the Mobile River at Mobile was damaged by an oil rig that floated into the structure during the storm. Currently, the four-lane bridge is open only to one lane in each direction. The contract to repair the bridge so that it may be opened to unrestricted traffic was awarded on October 17, 2005.

Due to damage sustained during Hurricane Katrina, five spans of the eastbound on-ramp from US 90 to I-10 eastbound must be replaced. Currently, the ramp is closed to traffic. Alabama is preparing plans to replace the five damaged spans

Florida: US 98 on Okaloosa Island sustained substantial damage during Hurricane Katrina. Many traffic signs and signals were damaged in the Miami area. Additionally, debris removal was needed throughout the affected parts of Florida.

Future Preventative Actions

The Bush Administration recognizes that more will have to be done to restore the Gulf Coast. I-10, US 90, and other important local roads are the economic lifeline of the hurricane-damaged region and play a central role in the economy of the entire Gulf Coast region. FHWA is bringing all its resources to bear to ensure that this region can get

moving again. Projects that will be the foundation for a long-term rebuilding effort will begin soon.

We have begun a review of existing bridges that might be impacted by storm surge conditions in the future. Before we can identify suitable retrofits for existing bridges of the types damaged during recent hurricanes, we must improve our understanding of, and ability to quantify, the lateral/transverse and uplift forces that result from floods and storm surges. Accordingly, we have initiated research at the Turner- Fairbank Highway Research Center to aid our understanding in this area. With respect to the design of new bridges, FHWA has developed a policy that defines a flood frequency approach for the hydraulic analysis and design of coastal bridges. We also are reviewing the problem of loose barges impacting bridges during storm conditions.

“Contraflow” is an emerging traffic operations area that requires close coordination of all levels of government. “Contraflow” (sometimes called “one way out”) is a technique used to increase highway capacity temporarily. The technique involves reversal of one or more lanes and shoulders in the inbound direction for use by outbound traffic. We recognize the challenges of evacuation and contraflow and the need for more attention to these areas in the future. As we did after Hurricane Ivan in 2004, we will analyze the events of Hurricane Katrina for lessons learned that can be applied to future situations. We also will continue to work with other Federal agencies to determine where transportation assets and systems can continue to contribute to evacuation planning and execution. FHWA will assist the Office of the Secretary of Transportation and the Department of Homeland Security in developing the Catastrophic Hurricane Evacuation Plans Report to Congress as mandated in SAFETEA-LU.

Stewardship and Oversight

While quick response in getting funding and support to the Gulf Coast region is important, we are also cognizant of the importance of financial accountability and stewardship. As the recovery work continues, I want to assure you that I am very mindful of the responsibility we have as stewards of these critical Federal resources. FHWA has taken steps to track all transactions related to the Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. We will ensure that funds are spent wisely and judiciously, and that projects comply with the requirements of our Emergency Relief program. American taxpayers deserve to know that each and every dollar dedicated to this tremendous effort is fully justified and properly accounted for every step of the way.

Conclusion

I believe that we have made significant progress thus far and are on our way to ensuring that the Gulf Coast region has a transportation system that will meet its long-term needs. We will continue to work with our State and Federal partners to ensure that

highway recovery efforts are completed quickly and in a fiscally responsible manner.

Mr. Chairman, members, thank you for this opportunity to testify. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.